

What is the American Dream?
American Perspectives, 1787 and Now

By

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Grade Level: 11-12

Duration: 2-3 periods

WI State Standards:

B.12.1 Explain different points of view on the same historical event, using data gathered from various sources, such as letters, journals, diaries, newspapers, government documents, and speeches

B.12.2 Analyze primary and secondary sources related to a historical question to evaluate their relevance, make comparisons, integrate new information with prior knowledge, and come to a reasoned conclusion

B.12.5 Gather various types of historical evidence, including visual and quantitative data, to analyze issues of freedom and equality, liberty and order, region and nation, individual and community, law and conscience, diversity and civic duty; form a reasoned conclusion in the light of other possible conclusions; and develop a coherent argument in the light of other possible arguments

C.12.4 Explain the multiple purposes of democratic government, analyze historical and contemporary examples of the tensions between those purposes, and illustrate how governmental powers can be acquired, used, abused, or legitimized

Inquiry:

The current presidential election is bringing the purpose of government in our society to a critical fork in the road: is government necessary in America today, or not? If our collective answer seems to be yes, what do we want government to do precisely? To consider this question, it seems necessary to reflect on who we are as a people and what we prize and prioritize as a nation. The T.E.A. Party has brought the Constitution back into the conversation to help answer these questions. The purpose of this lesson is to discern the American dream as it is popularly bandied about and to use primary source documents from the founding period to do the same, then come to a conclusion about the role of government in our society.

- 1) What is meant by the term, American dream, today?
- 2) Although the term, American dream, was not coined until 1931 by popular historian James Truslow Adams, what can we infer from the founding states as they debated the

Constitution—they may be called first dreamers—about what we could be as a people and a nation?

Lesson:

Day 1:

- 1) Ask students to write down what they dream for themselves as adults—what do they want?
- 2) Then expand the question: what do you want for America?
- 3) Next, have students read Jon Meacham's, "The American Dream: A Perfect Idea for Dark Times." (Time, June 21, 2012)
- 4) Students then identify the overarching themes of the American Dream: opportunity for economic success for all, liberty for all, and an overall better life (healthier, safer, easier?).
- 5) Ask students to compare their personal dreams (and their dreams for America) with the ideas presented in Meacham's article.
- 6) Ask students to then reflect on their dreams—and predict how likely they will be able to live the dream! Write their predictions and rationale.
- 7) Discuss small group, then bring to whole class to share out.

Day 2:

- 1) Students to work in pairs.
- 2) Direct students to use the CSAC website, "Documentary Resources" tab, "The States and Ratification" pull-down option
- 3) Students choose one state, click on it.
- 4) Students then choose one document in favor of ratification and one document opposed to ratification. Their choice of documents guided only by the following requirement: the students must be able to identify in the document a rationale supporting or opposing the Constitution—in other words, they have to be able to get the gist of the argument.
- 5) Students then summarize the rationale for support or opposition.
- 6) Students then determine if in fact, the arguments are similar to the American Dream; if so, they need to describe to what extent they are American Dream arguments.
- 7) Students write a statement taking a position on the purpose of the founding of the U.S. in a Google document.
- 8) Have students analyze the Google document and in groups of four now, respond to the question: what did the Founders want for all Americans for all times?
- 9) Share with the full class and revise to one final statement.
- 10) Compare or contrast with their initial personal statements.